

High School Career Academies: A Pathway to Educational Reform in Urban School Districts?

Citation

Maxwell, N., & Rubin, V. (2000). High School Career Academies: A Pathway to Educational Reform in Urban School Districts? Kalamazoo, MI: W. E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

Highlights

- The study examined an urban school district's attempt to develop and implement a uniform education-centric Career Academy model between 1990 and 1997. The study also included an impact evaluation of student outcomes (see [CLEAR's profile of Maxwell \[2001\]](#)¹ for impact evaluation results).
- The Career Academy model created a school-within-a-school structure, with both school-based and work-based elements, for students who were in grades 10 through 12. The program sought to increase students' knowledge and skill acquisition in high school, continuation rates onto higher education, employment rates and wages, and capacity for lifelong learning.
- The study drew on qualitative data from the program's annual evaluations of district and program performance and on student characteristics, program participation, and outcomes.
- The qualitative study found that although the program succeeded in articulating a uniform model of school-to-work program throughout the district, schools and academies differed in their development and implementation of this model. These differences were due to the political, community, and funding environments of these organizations.

Features of Career Academies

The urban school district that was the focus of this study had high poverty rates (20 percent of the population were in poverty), a very diverse population (90 percent of students belonged to ethnic or racial minority groups), and lagging educational outcomes that were well below the national average. These conditions motivated the city and district to articulate a uniform model of school-to-work programs throughout the district. This model created a school-within-a-school structure, integrated academic and vocational curricula, and involved employer representatives to provide curriculum guidance and exposure to work-related activities.

The district's model had both school-based and work-based elements. The school-based component required students of grades 10 through 12 to take four classes (three academic and one laboratory class) per grade that integrated curricula or material from the target industry. The work-based component

¹ Maxwell, N. (2001). Step to College: Moving from the High School Career Academy through the 4 Year University. Evaluation Review, 25(6), 619–654.

required students to complete an internship in the summer after their junior year, as well as to participate in a number of visits and workshops to learn about the educational pathways to highly paid jobs. The program aimed to improve student outcomes by (1) increasing knowledge and skill acquisition in high school, (2) increasing students' continuation rates onto higher education, (3) increasing employment rates and wages, and (4) laying the foundation for lifelong learning for students to continue to build careers and increase human capital.

Features of the Study

The study examined an urban school district's attempt to develop and implement a uniform education-centric Career Academy model between 1990 and 1997. It focused in particular on nine Academies. These were diverse in their structure, size, age, the degree to which they were able to access external financial support, and their progress in model implementation. The process study drew on a rich array of existing qualitative data collected as part of the program's annual evaluations of district and program performance, as well as on quantitative data on student characteristics, participation, and outcomes.

Findings

The study found that the program succeeded in articulating a uniform model of school-to-work program throughout the district, and helped increase the number of Career Academies and career-preparation activities for students. However, schools and Career Academies differed in their development and implementation of this model. These differences were due to the political, community, and funding environments of these organizations.

City Redevelopment Agency (CRA) funds to establish, expand, and enhance Career Academies were key to successful model implementation. Additional funding for the programs came from the school district, the state government, federal government, local government and municipal government. The study implied that schools' access to these additional resources became more important over time: the CRA budget did not increase despite the growth in program enrollment, reducing the per-student allocation from an average of \$2,910 per student in 1990–1991 to an average of \$574 in 1995–1996.

Schools' socio-economic status appeared to be correlated with the completeness of program implementation, but the relationship was not linear. Schools with mostly middle-income students had the strongest Career Academies, because they had strong pressure for reform but also sufficient staff capacity for implementation. Schools with mostly low-income students lacked resources, funds, and capacity, whereas schools with high socio-economic status were resistant to integrating a vocational focus in their academic curriculum.

The Career Academies had mixed results securing student participation in the program. 80 percent of students taking designated curriculum classes were enrolled in the Career Academies, and Academy students on average took 13 Academy semester courses. Only 23 percent of program participants met the "full academic curriculum" benchmark of taking 20 courses. Only 28 percent of participants enrolled in all three sophomore, junior, and senior years as required. Fewer than 60 percent enrolled in both junior and senior years.

Considerations for Interpreting the Findings

The study was effective in presenting both the impetus for program development and the theoretical framework for the intervention, and in using these to guide the presentation of findings and results. The study effectively combined qualitative and quantitative data to provide an assessment of program development and implementation. However, a lack of detailed information on the qualitative data collection methods and analysis techniques could raise concerns that the analysis may be somewhat subjective or selective. It is possible that others who review the data may arrive at different conclusions.